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Pope Francis, sitting in a chair, shakes the hand of a man using a wheelchair

Pope Francis greets a man in a wheelchair during an audience at the Vatican Sept. 11, 2023, with members of ANMIL, an Italian association of workers who have been seriously injured or disabled at work. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Workers are human beings, not machines or "spare parts" to be used to drive production and profit at all costs, Pope Francis told members of an organization that advocates for and protects the rights of those seriously injured or disabled on the job.

"Safety at work is like the air we breathe: we realize its importance only when it is tragically lacking, and it is always too late," he said.

"We cannot get used to accidents at work nor resign ourselves to indifference toward injuries. We cannot accept throwing away human life," he said during an audience at the Vatican Sept. 11 with members of ANMIL, an Italian association of workers who have been seriously injured or disabled at work.

Francis also harshly criticized the "ugly" and widespread branding strategy of "carewashing," in which "entrepreneurs or legislators, instead of investing in safety, prefer to wash their consciences with some charitable work."

"Thus, they put their public image before everything else, acting as benefactors in culture or sports, in good works, restoring works of art or buildings of worship," he said, and yet, they neglect the fact that God's glory is the living person they employ.

"This is the first job: taking care of brothers and sisters, the body of brothers and sisters. The duty toward workers is paramount: life is not disposed of for any reason, especially if it is poor, precarious and fragile," he said.

Despite the technologies and means available to create safer workplaces, "the tragedies and ordeals unfortunately do not cease," he said. Sometimes the news reports of casualties sound like a dispatch from a war zone, he added.

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"This happens when work is dehumanized," he said, and instead of being a way people find fulfillment by serving the community, work "becomes an exasperated race for profit. And that is terrible."

"The tragedies begin when the end is no longer the human being, but productivity and people become a machine of production," he said. Indifference to the tragedies results when the world of work becomes "devoted to the idolatry of the market."

"One cannot, in the name of greater profit, demand too many work hours," which reduces people's ability to concentrate, or "think of counting insurance forms or safety requirements as unnecessary expenses and loss of earnings," the pope said.

"We are human beings and not machinery, unique people and not spare parts. And many times, some workers are treated like spare parts," he said.

The association was celebrating its 80th anniversary, and the pope thanked its members for seeking to protect and represent those living with work-related injuries and the spouses and children of those who died from work-related accidents as it also advocates for legal protections and social assistance for injured workers and the families of those killed on the job.

He also thanked them for focusing attention on safety in the workplace and for working to improve laws for the injured and promote ways they can regain employment.